

# Archived Information

## **Interim Evaluation of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory**

The week of April 4, 1999, through April 9, 1999 was spent on site at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon. Arriving on site - having participated in three teleconference training sessions put on by the DIR staff – and reviewing the advance materials provided by the Lab, and edited by DIR – I was thoroughly prepared for the individual and panel presentations of Lab staff, board members, partners and clients.

The purpose of the review and site visit was to ascertain the compliance of the NWREL (Lab) to the OERI contract. The evaluation design takes the four thematic areas specified in the RFP and asks eight specific questions related to the four areas. The following observations/comments are based on a review of the materials as well as the individual and group presentation by Lab staff, board members and client/partners.

### **I. Brief Overview of Laboratory Review**

The physical location of the Lab, in downtown Portland would seem to assure ease of access for local clients as well as out-of-town – e.g. regional – clients. Additionally, the Lab is in close proximity to Portland State University and many of the larger businesses, which facilitates linkage to the academic and business community.

The up-scale building and office space occupied by the Lab certainly leaves me with the impression of a prosperous corporate operation.

On a more human level, the leadership of the Lab are clearly well polished and politically savvy. They were quite responsive to requests for specific data and proved to be excellent hosts,

meeting whatever needs that the review team or individuals within the team might have. Overall a very savvy and polished corporate operation.

## **II. Implementation and Management**

### **A. To what extent is the REL doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?**

In response to the question “To what extent is the REL doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?” – one must agree that the Lab has established a board of directors which includes the five service area chief educational officers; numerous superintendents, school principals, business leaders and to lesser degree, class room teachers and school board members (briefing book I).

This grouping of individuals, as mandated in the RFP should place the Lab in a position to insure that high level policy actors are linked, not only to one another and the Lab’s agenda, but clearly they are well positioned to advance the school change mission.

The board, having reorganized itself into small working groups as well as lessening the total number of voting members, should improve the policy discussion within the board and thus more clearly align the role of the board versus the role of the Lab; e.g.: the difference between policy making (the board) and the operationalization of those policies (the Lab).

Clearly, the strength of this model rests in having the senior policy actors from within the service region in contact with one-another and the Lab. This high level set of linkages has – and continues to – insure that the Lab has access to sites within the service area(s) administered by these chief educational officers.

The structural alignment of the NWREL, as outlined in their organizational chart appears

to be a highly centralized management system with the twelve division and center directors reporting directly to either the executive director/CEO or the associative executive director; as well as the department heads of finance, human resources, development and communications, and planning and program development, for a sixteen discreet lines.

During the site briefing, the peer review panel was assured that these apparently separate lines did in fact meet at least on a monthly basis as a group to share ideas, tasks, contacts, as well as a means to offset or maximize the OERI funds for program implementation. While the briefing materials did not directly provide us with this information, the briefing by NWREL personnel all made reference to working collaboratively and the monthly meetings as well as members of departments/centers ability to attend the staff meetings of “other” departments/centers.

The downside of this approach is equally clear. We know that school change requires teacher, student and parent buy-in or ownership in order to be effective and sustainable. Thus, after 30 years and millions of dollars spent on school change/improvement through Lab projects, little demonstrated change has occurred.

In order to improve the Lab management and implementation of projects, I suggest revisiting the assumption in the RFP which “mandates” school change as a top town policy function and has thus created a Lab which has little focus on students, parents or classroom teachers as the beginning points for any real change. Additionally, inclusions of socially, economically, ethnically and/or politically marginalized people in the policy formation process would greatly improve the applicability of new program initiatives, as these are the folks that are the target groups of the Lab.

**B. To what extent is the REL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?**

The REL has developed numerous self-monitoring processes that they appear to use to plan and adopt activities in response to customer demands. Among them, the 1998 Strategy Plan, the 1998 Internal Evaluation Report and the 1998 Customer Satisfaction Survey. Additionally, the above reference to the monthly departmental/center meetings should insure appropriate internal discussion of customer needs.

This cross departmental/center collaboration is one means of assuring that the various strains of the NWREL are aware of and responsive to the needs of consumers. Additionally, NWREL conducted a Program Satisfaction Survey 1997 which the briefing book argues was linked to their 1997 Needs assessment, as well as providing the basis for the NWREL Board Self Assessment policy directions and responding to the findings of the Self Assessment External Review Panel materials as well as the PARS process outlined in briefing book two and the less formal feedback from site partners and trainers. Finally, one (could) also argue that the numbers of repeat clients, number of “hits” on the NWREL web site and the amount of publications sold, as affirmation of the responsiveness of the Lab to client needs.

The quality of the NWREL’s materials and services is difficult to assess. The Lab seems to have a devoted and loyal following for its products and services, however, in order to assess the overall quality of the products and services beyond individual testimonials, internal self reviews, provided by NWREL staff and supporters there is a clear need for more external review and methodologically sound analysis and documentation.

These services and products would appear to be useful to the Lab’s clients in as much as the Lab states that its goals and services are based on Needs Assessment conducted within their

service region, outlined in briefing booklet II. Further, based on staff briefings and handouts, e.g. traits based products, the materials, training and services are intentionally designed to work in concert and are written in such a manner as to provide the classroom teacher with usable, understandable research based materials. The Lab does this in an attempt to increase usability and access for their clients.

As stated above, NWREL's stated purpose(s) is to meet the needs of the consumer, by beginning the product development based on the regional needs survey, by asking the chief educational officers of the five states in their region (who serve on the board) maintaining contact with the other Labs and national policy leaders (see briefing book II) and overview materials of Labs mission and policy statement

### **III. Quality**

#### **To what extent is the REL developing high quality products and services?**

The extent to which the REL is developing high quality products and services is at best difficult to quantify. Although the Lab has an impressive list of products (see briefing book II), a regional and national list of partnerships and strategic alliances (briefing book I), there is little by way of documentation outlining an appropriate methodical systematic attempt to analyze the products and services by "outside" subject matter experts. The exception to this would be the 1997 Gilmore Research Group's "Program Satisfaction Survey". That said, it is still worth noting the lack of professional, methodologically appropriate analysis of the products and services.

There is evidence that suggests that the quality of the products and services is acceptable when one examines the number of web site hits, repeat users of the services and the mailing lists

of the Lab. However, one is unable to discern the actual number of individual clients. In other words it would be more useful if the Lab would document the individual, unduplicated counts for the above cited and total data.

#### **IV. Utility**

##### **A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the Laboratory useful to and used by customers?**

The evidence presented by the Lab in the advance materials and during the on-site briefing share the same shortcomings noted above. The lack of methodological analysis focused on the extent that the products and services provided by the Lab are useful to and used by customers is best represented by the number of repeat customers (see Briefing Book II & pie charts in Briefing book I). The Lab does a good job of teaching and documenting the requests for services and products and the records clearly suggest that there is utility for at least a number of sites.

A stronger case could be made if record keeping provided unduplicated counts and additional outside professional analysis; pre and post; of sites were routinely conducted. Otherwise the potential for self-serving analysis leaves what data are available suspect.

##### **B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?**

The extent to which the Lab is focused on customer needs was attested to by a number of site partners during panel presentations, the above cited customer satisfaction survey (1997), and the charts and graphs contained in the briefing book. Here again there would appear to be a lack of sound methodological analysis. More to the point, there appears to be a lack of minority parent/student involvement in the development and implementation of the products and services,

which may account for the limited success of the programs. Thus, the apparent limited focus, as it relates to customer needs, limits the potential range of customer needs addressed in the research and development of products and services.

The Lab might seek ways and means to insure the inclusion of a more representational customer base.

## **V. Outcomes and Impact**

### **A. To what extent is the REL's work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?**

The impact on student success attributable to the NWREL's product production, literature dissemination and training is argued by NWREL staff to be "gaining". The Mississippi Weyerhaeuser/NWREL sites for OTE and OTE II lack sufficient documentation in the materials provided to assume that the fifteen-year-old OTE project has made substantial improvements in student achievement. Rather a case can be made for an improved research design so as to ensure that any gains made using either OTE or OTE II are substantiated within an accepted design framework. The Lab should be complimented on the formation of the partnership with the private sector as well as taking the lead for this project on a national level. However, one needs to question the limited impact of OTE after such long tenure in the market and can only hope that the new and revised OTE II will do more to effect student improvement (see OTE II binder).

### **B. To what extent does the Laboratory assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?**

In an attempt to gage the degree that NWREL assists state and local agencies in implementing school improvement strategies, it was helpful to review the number of

superintendents, site partners, principals, and chief educational officers involved with NWREL. The materials in briefing book I which documents the number of training requests and state reform managers and regional service providers within and outside their regional service area, with whom NWREL works. NWREL informing and maintain these alliances is clearly positioned to influence the policy formation and implementation of school reform policy at the local, state, and national levels. However, the degree to which NWREL is directly impacting policy formation concerning reform is at best questionable.

**C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?**

NWREL seems to be seen as the leader in school reform both at the regional and national level as evidenced by the acceptance by the other Regional Labs such as SERVE, NWREL's list of products, training events, research agendas and stated objective(s) is to effectuate and facilitate school reform efforts. These efforts run through the materials which were provided and supported by testimonials of NWREL board members, staff, partners, and trainers during the weeklong site visit.

The degree or extent to which NWREL has advanced its reputation, to date, assumes that we start with no regional or material presence of NWREL. Since the Lab has been in existence for almost thirty years at this point, I find that outside reformer educationalists and regional – and to some degree material – policy makers the awareness of NWREL is not as high among teachers, university faculty and the general public as one might expect.

This limited awareness may be attributed as much – or more – to the contract's mandates however operational school reform is more involved than the passage of policy pronouncements. If school reform is the desired product of this RFP, a refocusing of the target groups and more



importantly the inclusion of true stakeholders as majority members of the NWREL board will be necessary. If, however, the purpose here is drive school reform solely through elitist policy making and educationalist self interest, then the Lab requires only minor operational adjustments, e.g., meeting deliverable dates, to fully meet its purpose(s).

## **VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products and Services**

In general, the Lab's programs, products and services appear to be meeting the needs of a number of sites, both within their regional service area and across the U.S.

The internal processes and procedures are well within acceptable professional corporate norms as the efficient use of staff, space and time for the development of goods and services. However, there is a limited range of cultural, linguistic, socio/economically appropriate products listed in the inventory, as provided, or in the "pipeline" stated in the presentations which requires addresses in order to meet the changing demographics of the U.S.

## **VII. Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement and Strategies for Improvement**

The Lab needs to develop systems for analysis of their products and services that meet acceptable methodological standards. At present there is little validation, materials/studies to support the assertion that school change and or improvements are occurring at their partner sites, which also need expansion if systemic change is to happen.

Additionally, the composition of the advisory board and the staffing patterns need to be addressed in a serious fashion to insure appropriate demographic representation at all levels of the enterprise.

In closing, I suggest that the DOE revisit the RFP criteria. If the purpose of the RFP is

truly to bring about school change and improvement, then the entire composition, mission of the NWREL needs to be re-tasked, for it is clear that after thirty years of operation that wide spread and systemic change has not occurred at any level. This should not be an unanticipated outcome given that the RFP and hence Lab is and has been focused on senior policy level individuals. These people tend to be highly transient, political appointees and far removed from the classrooms and front rooms where time educational needs are identified. Also, the lack of involvement of the NWREL with university schools of education (only one “partnership” is identified in briefing book I) insures that new as well as re-certifying teachers are not a part of the needs identification process nor the solution development. This, too, contributes to the lack of wide – spread adoption of the basic ideological approaches being developed and advanced by the Lab.

In closing I am required to state that the Lab is doing precisely what the RFP calls for. The question really is whether this approach will bear fruit, given that thirty years of funding has not resulted in an orchard.